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ABSTRACT

The history of the study of religion at Wellesley College from its founding in 1875 until 1980 is considered. Initially, faculty were sought who possessed expressed Christian character and were able to instruct in the bible, which was a study requirement until 1968. The predominantly Protestant-Christian orientation of the religion department changed markedly during the 1970s. The Vietnam War was significant in drawing large enrollments for courses on Asian religions. Ethics courses also registered sizeable enrollments, while introductory courses on Old Testament and New Testament also had steady numbers. Educationally, the the religion department considers itself fulfilling the following roles: providing instruction in the Bible; teaching the religious issues in the middle ages and in the modern and contemporary periods; broadening the world-view of the students through instruction of the religious heritage of the non-Western world; and instilling in students the value of understanding religious traditions on their own terms in a pluralistic context. An important development was an agreement made between Wellesley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the early 1970s that instruction of Asian religions be given on the MIT campus on a yearly basis. Religion and humanistic courses offered by the two colleges play a vital role in teaching the future leaders in science and technology humanistic and ethical concerns. Information about the faculty of Wellesley's religion department is included. (SW)

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THE STUDY OF RELIGION AT WELLESLEY COLLEGE: IN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGING LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IN AMERICA

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The Study of Religion at Wellesley College: in the Context of Changing Liberal Arts Education in America

For over half a century after the founding of the College in 1875, the instruction of the Bible constituted an essential part of all phases of Wellesley's education. The founder, Henry F. Durant, who boldly pioneered in the education of women, the quality of which was to parallel that of men, was strongly inspired by the 19th century evangelical Christianity. He in turn sought faculty members who not only possessed expressed Christian character but also who were able to instruct in the Bible. In 1896-7, the Bible instruction was systematized by the formation of the Department of Biblical History, Literature and Interpretation. Until 1937, every student at Wellesley was required to study the Bible throughout four years with the same standard and rigor as any other subject. Meanwhile, while ministers of different denominations conducted Sunday services. (Kendrick, Eliza Hall and Paul Lehmann, History of Bible Teaching at Wellesley College, 1875-1950.

After 1938, the College still required the Old and New Testaments for all sophmores and the Department of Biblical History, Literature and Interpretation was the largest in the college. A major portion of teaching for every member of the Department was identical. Every semester, several sections of both the Old and New Testament courses were offered. Although many students would not have taken them without the college-wide requirement, alumnae from this era have often reported that the study of the Bible was the heart of their educational experience at wellesley. In 1968, however, the College dropped the Bible requirement, largely in response to the changing educational expectations and objectives occurring nationwide in the period of important cultural transition in America. At the same time, the name of the Department was changed to Religion and Biblical Studies. This period coincided with the sobering realization, which

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not every one was ready to accept without difficulty, that the Christian West no longer, or perhaps had never, dominated the global civilization. Needless to say, the Vietnam War, particularly its moral assessment among the nation's young, played a major role in bringing about the significant alteration of the world view across the land.

In no small measure, as a result of the changing social ethos of the time, the predominantly Protestant-Christian orientation of the Department since the founding of the college changed markedly during the 1970's. Among the four professors who retired during that decade, three were biblical scholars. The appointments made during the seventies represent areas of specialization not found before 1968: Catholic Studies, American Religions, East Asian Religions and South Asian Religions.

After abolishing the Bible requirement in 1968, the enrollment figures inevitably dropped. In the late sixties and early seventies, courses on Asian Religions drew large numbers of students as was witnessed on other campuses across the country. Ethics courses also registered sizeable enrollment figures. Introductory courses on Old Testament and New Testament have also enjoyed steady, reliable numbers. In the late 1970's, the Department enjoyed the largest rate of increase enrollment in the entire college. One of the major factors was the introductory Asian Religions course taught both at Wellesley and MIT, with which Wellesley established an affiliation over a decade ago. In the first decade of the official affiliation between MIT and Wellesley, an idea in part of Wellesley's conscious decision to remain single gender against the formidable tide of the time, the Religion and Chinese Departments enrolled the largest number of MIT students. It must be mentioned that Professor Huston Smith, before his departure from MIT, had made an indelible impression on his students and Wellesley's Asian specialist was left with the task of sustaining their continuing, if not growing, interest in Asian religions conceived in a broadly humanistic mold.

During the 1979-80 academic year, the Department debated at great and painful length re-examing itself on two issues: requirements for the major and the name of the Department. The current requirements are eight courses for the major with at least one course taken in each of three groups: Biblical, Western and Asian. Although the three categories were not conceived from a uniform criterion such as methodological or geographical, they appeared to serve as helpful heuristic rubrics under which to examine three distinct and related concerns and phenomena, none of which can be overlooked by any serious student of religion in the radically pluralistic twentieth century world. Methodologically, the three categories would incorporate philosophical, archaeological, theological, sociological and ethnological perspectives, among others; geographically, they give due justice, albeit not limited, to the three areas in which the world's major religious traditions originated and developed: Near Eastern and Europe, South Asia, and East Asia. This is judged as a minimum attempt to emphasize the increasingly multifaceted character of the global human society and the growing importance of knowing and understanding the traditions other than one's own. The second issue emerged initially out of the realization of the Department that "Religion and Biblical Studies" was a transitional nomenclature. Although the meaning of the term "religion" was never formally established, it was apparent that biblical studies should no longer be considered any more separate from "religion" than any of the other fields included under the duplicitous and ambiguous heading. The historical consideration, which argued for the retention of "Biblical Studies" as part of the name, was judged at the end as less important than embodying the principle of pluralism upon which secular "liberal arts" education was predicated. It is important to note that in the best judgment of the Department "religion" is not a unified discipline with a distinct methodology of its own. It is a composite term incorporating a number of methodologies for a critical examination

of the human religious phenomena and experiences. When the Department was reviewed a year later, in the outside committee of three chosen from three schools closely resembling in quality and size but distinct in tradition, the committee was unequivocal in their emphatic support of both decisions reached in 1979-80.

At the present time, the Department has six full-time slots staffed by seven people whose expertise lie in the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Church History, Theology, American Religions, East Asian Religions and South Asian Religions. The theologian has explored social scientific studies of religion, particularly in psychology of religion, while the Americanist has taught ethics. Due to a number of retirements in the late '60's and early '70's, the faculty is young, concentrated in the mid-'30's. Having been trained at representative graduate schools in their respective fields (Harvard, Columbia, Wisconsin and Duke), they are active in research and writing. Close proximity to a number of theological schools and universities in the Boston area provide ample opportunities for that purpose. During the 1981-82 academic year, the Kathryn W. Davis Professorship in Slavic Studies, that rotates among several departments within the College, brought two eminent scholars of Russian religion to the Religion Department: Michael Bourdeaux, founder and director of Keston College, a research institute devoted to religion in Communist lands, in Kent, England, and Dimitri Obolensky, Professor of Russian and Balkan History, Christ Church, Oxford. One of the major tasks facing the Department in the near future is to explore ways to give a fairer treatment to those areas that were neglected by staffing constraints. Foremost among them is Judaica.

Educationally, the Religion Department considers itself fulfilling a role vital to the life of the College mainly in four areas. One, it continues to instruct the students in the Bible, a fountainhead of Western civilization. Two, it teaches the religious issues in the middle ages and in the modern

and contemporary periods. Three, it broadens the world-view of the students through the instruction of the religious heritage of the non-Western world. Four, pedagogically it seeks to instill in students the value of understanding religious traditions on their own terms in the pluralistic context and the due sense of respect for and tolerance with the truth claims of cultures other than one's own. Inculcation of such values seems essential not only to being human in the modern world context, but also to the very meaning of an educated individual.

A notable phenomenon that cannot be left unsaid is the agreement made between MIT and Wellesley in the early 1970's that instruction of Asian religions be given on the MIT campus on a yearly basis. This was a concrete manifestation of closer cooperation between the two institutions that have traditionally two distinct educational goals. Religion courses, as well as other humanities courses offered both by MIT and Wellesley, continue to play a vital role in teaching the future leaders in science and engineering the humanistic dimension of modern, technological society, and that the survival of the human race and of the earth hinges on a number of complex issues, not excluding ethical ones.

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